Mercy Health
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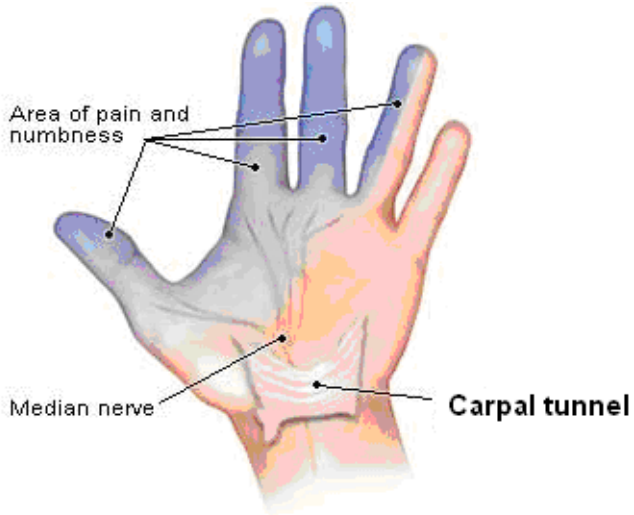
Your important health information

Pregnancy related carpal tunnel syndrome



What is the carpal tunnel?

The carpal tunnel is formed by the bones of the wrist and is covered by a ligament made of strong connective tissue. This tunnel provides a small passage into the hand for the nerves and tendons travelling to the fingers.

What is carpal tunnel syndrome?

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a painful condition caused by compression of the median nerve within the carpal tunnel. It occurs when the structures in or around the nerve become inflamed and swollen, resulting in a pressure build up in the tunnel itself. Fluid retention in your hands during pregnancy can cause this.

Pressure on the nerve in the carpal tunnel can cause numbness, tingling, burning or pain in the areas supplied by the nerve (part of the palm, the thumb, index, middle and ring finger) or weakness in the hand muscles. One or both hands may be affected.

Carpal tunnel syndrome is diagnosed through a thorough clinical examination. An accurate diagnosis is required to ensure the most appropriate treatment is implemented.

What symptoms might I experience?

- Numbness or a burning sensation in part of the palm, the thumb, index, middle and ring fingers
- Waking at night with hand pain or numbness
- Morning stiffness or cramping of the hand/wrist
- Difficulty gripping objects
- Difficulty using your hands (for example writing or turning a door knob)
- Thumb weakness
- Mottled appearance of the hands

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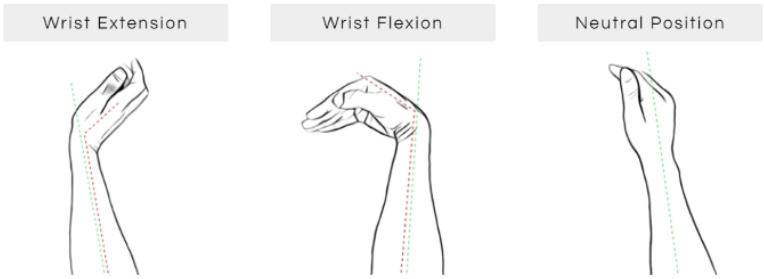
What can I do if I have carpal tunnel syndrome?

- Avoid firmly gripping objects.
- Avoid repeated heavy lifting.
- For objects such as bags or clothes, try to use your forearm instead of your hand when lifting - for example, rest the object on your arm rather than holding it in your hand.
- Avoid prolonged repetitive activities (like typing or stirring while cooking) or activities that aggravate your symptoms.
- Avoid sleeping with your arm and wrist tucked underneath you in too much **flexion.** Try to keep the wrist in a **neutral** position (see below).



Things to try

- Apply ice (wrapped in a towel) to your wrists for 15-20 minutes every two to three hours or run them under cold water.
- Elevate your hand where possible.
- Your physiotherapist may suggest a wrist splint to hold the wrist in a **neutral** position, at night and/or during the day.
- A compression bandage may also be used to prevent fluid building up in your hands and wrists.
- Use a rolled up towel to keep your wrists in a **neutral** position when using a computer.
- Use a pillow to elevate your hand and keep a **neutral** position when resting in bed.
- Opening and closing your hand to make a fist in a pumping motion may help to reduce the build-up of fluid in the hand. Repeat 10 times, three times a day.
- Gently massage the fluid out of the hand by stroking from your fingertips towards your shoulder.

Will carpal tunnel syndrome go away after I have delivered?

In most cases symptoms will ease following delivery as pregnancy-related fluid retention reduces. Occasionally the symptoms are ongoing and can be aggravated by caring for your newborn baby.

Caring for your baby

- When feeding and holding your baby, use pillows or rolled up towels to support the baby and keep your wrists in a **neutral** position.
- When lifting your baby, use your forearms to support their weight instead of your hands.

Where can I get help after birth?

If your symptoms do not settle within the first few months after giving birth, please contact the physiotherapy department or your doctor for assistance with referral to a hand therapist.

Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact:

Physiotherapy

Mercy Hospital for Women
Phone: 03 8458 4141

Werribee Mercy Hospital
Phone: 03 8754 3150

Acknowledgements

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This document provides general information only and is not intended to replace advice about your health from a qualified practitioner. If you are concerned about your health, you should seek advice from a qualified practitioner.